Phantom Pain

The word phantom means something that you can feel but cannot see. After a part of the body, like an arm or leg is amputated by an accident or from surgery, it is common to sometimes feel that the arm or leg is still there. This is called phantom sensation. If the person has pain as though the arm or leg is still there, it is called phantom pain.

Cause of Pain

The cause of phantom pain is not known but it probably happens because the nerves in the body are still telling the brain that the arm or leg is still there. There may be an increase in pain messages sent to the brain while there are fewer messages to block those pain messages because the limb is gone. Often the pain becomes less over time, especially as you are able to use a prosthesis.

Phantom pain is very real but not everyone who has an amputation has phantom pain. The pain may feel like cramping, burning, stabbing or shooting pain. There are some things you can do to help ease the pain.

Some things that can make phantom pain worse:

- Being too tired
- Too much pressure on the amputated arm or leg
- Changes in the weather
- Stress
- Infection
- An artificial limb or prosthesis that does not fit properly

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Learn more about your health care.
• Poor circulation
• Swelling

**Things you can do that may help ease the pain**

Some things you can do that might help make phantom pain better:

• Use massage, tapping and squeezing to desensitize the limb.
• Slowly tighten and release the muscle in the limb.
• Take medicines that your doctor orders.
• Keep the remaining part of the arm or leg warm.
• Exercise the remaining part of the arm or leg.
• Change your position.
• Take a warm bath or use a shower massage, but only after the incision line is closed and healed.
• Think about relaxing the part of the body that is missing.
• If you have a prosthesis on, take it off for a few minutes.
• If you do not have your prosthesis on, put it on and get active.
• If there is swelling, try an ace wrap or shrinker on the limb.
• Write down when you have phantom pain and what you were doing when it happened. This might help you find some of the things that cause your pain.

**Other Treatments**

If you find that your prosthesis causes more pain, you may need to adjust the socks to improve the fit or have other adjustments made.

Talk to your doctor or therapist about your pain and what you have done to try to ease it. Most people with an amputation find the pain happens less often and is less severe over time. In some cases, other treatments may be needed to control the pain. Treatments may include the use of a nerve stimulator called a TENS, biofeedback, acupuncture, hypnosis, other medicines or surgery.